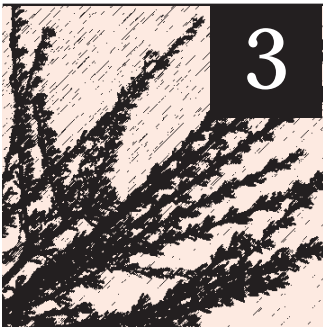


Closer to Home



The best example of a Mediterranean biome here in Southern California exists in the Santa Monica Mountains just adjacent to Los Angeles. In 1978, because these mountains and adjacent seashore exhibit the components of a Mediterranean biome, Congress established Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area – a unit of the National Park System – to protect the resources of this unique ecosystem.

One of the special resources of these mountains is the plant life (flora). The distribution of plant life in the Park is determined by some of the following factors: presence of water, elevation, aspect, proximity to the ocean, and the presence and frequency of fire. At least seven different plant communities occur in the Santa Monica Mountains, including: Coastal Strand, Coastal Salt Marsh, Freshwater Marsh, Coastal Sage Scrub, Chaparral, Riparian Woodland, Valley Grassland, and Southern Oak Woodland. The two prominent plant communities, more typical of a Mediterranean Scrubland biome, are Coastal Sage Scrub and Chaparral.

Coastal Sage Scrub occurs in drier sites and lower elevations than chaparral, especially on south-facing slopes along the coast. Often occurring in recently eroded areas, this community plays an important role in soil stabilization. Soils underlying Coastal Sage Scrub tend to be low in nutrients and subject to rapid erosion, and they are comprised of a high percentage of sand and gravel. Coastal Sage Scrub is often referred to as “soft chaparral,” characterized by soft-leaved, grayish-green, aromatic shrubs. Look for purple sage, California sagebrush, coastal buckwheat and laurel sumac as examples of this type of plant community.

Chaparral, the dominant plant community in the Santa Monica Mountains, is characterized by fire-adapted evergreen shrubs growing on coarse-textured soils with limited water-holding capacity. The drought-adapted leaves of the chaparral plant species are often small, leathery, thick, fuzzy and/or waxy. Depending on the species, after a fire, chaparral plants may reproduce either by seeds, a root-crown burl, or both. Look for ceanothus, toyon, manzanita, and chamise as examples of this type of plant community.

Fire ecology has played an important role in shaping the ecosystem of Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. Fire is a major factor in controlling nutrient cycles and energy pathways. It has maintained the ecosystem for over thousands of years through periodic lightning fires and possible prehistoric burning by Native Americans. The dynamic role of fire makes this Mediterranean biome thrive.

*The word **chaparral** comes from the Spanish word, **chaparro**, referring to a dense live oak scrub plant that has similar characteristics of the plant group. **Al** means “place of” in Spanish so Chaparral means “place of chaparro.”*